

Essay

# Critical Discourse Analysis and Academic Literacies: My Encounters With Student Writing

Author(s):

**Ron Christiansen**

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I'm very careful to cover my ass. If I'm giving a student a low grade, I make sure I've pointed out why. I don't want them coming back and I'm unable to point out specifically why I gave them a C.

— Writing instructor

I will make sure in the future that I am careful and back up my arguments with good facts.

— Student writer, Spring 2001

The teacher who acknowledges the beliefs she brings to the conversation is equipped to listen to her students more carefully than the teacher who holds her beliefs so closely that she can no longer see them as beliefs. (236)

— Dawn Skorczewski

These statements indicate some of the everyday realities of being a writing instructor, suggesting some of the pressures that shape teacher discourse and students' interpretations of what we, as teachers, write and say to them about their writing. I know these particular realities affect me. Because I have to negotiate these realities, my responses to students can seem contradictory and incoherent. Most of the time these inconsistencies remain hidden, not up for discussion, though they may create confusion and even distrust. My purpose here, therefore, is to look into my own discourse, to unravel and toss about these discursive pressures.

For several years I have been a writing teacher in an alternative high school and an adjunct for a community college and university, and for two years I have taught introductory writing courses full-time at the college level. Inevitably, I have received papers that have caused me to pause, pondering over what I will say back to the student. Some of these papers are not written very well, seemingly following no pattern or rhetorical strategy; some are downright offensive because of their apparent lack of

thought or coherence, and others because they seem to espouse racist, sexist, and misinformed ideas. Much has been written about helping students to become more critical and more familiar with rhetorical strategies, a central tenet in most current writing approaches. It certainly seems useful to figure out ways to help students see how power in discourse not only situates them in particular ways, but, to some extent, also prevents them from even considering certain ideas. I've had positive experiences in classes and in individual conferences as students work through the layers of culturally and socially constructed meanings within a "text," an outside essay, their own essay, or even their own social practices. But in lambasting the evil hegemony of the discursive practices of the powerful, I am, at times, keenly aware of my own power in this constructed space of the classroom.

A temptation for me, and I would suppose for many teachers, whether conscious or not, is to wash away our own complicity by focusing on the discursive powers of advertising, or the conservative right, or the monopolized, commercial media. But how can I expect students to interrogate the ways in which *their* discourse has been shaped and, even possibly, co-opted by hegemonic structures, if I am not willing to do the same myself? I will argue here that it is not enough to investigate the power "out there" which influences texts, but that teachers must also, metaphorically and literally, put our own discursive practices on the table for scrutiny.

Of course many studies have already attempted this—for example Richard Straub and Andrea Lunsford's groundbreaking *Twelve Readers Reading*—but, as these researchers admit, "[w]e knew from the start that our study would be necessarily limited because teachers would have neither the context of a classroom nor the personal contact with students to inform their reading of the texts" (3). While Straub and Lunsford's work helps us to look at our own comments more closely and works to show the myriad ways in which teachers can effectively respond to student writing, their samples of teacher response are decontextualized "models" (1). Their research clearly confirms what many suspected: experienced and respected teachers are moving away from, to use their term, a "controlling style" in their responses to student writing (374). These models are valuable, but they are clearly idealized teacher texts. These twelve well-known teacher-scholars had more invested in making these comments match their theoretical views than does the everyday teacher working late at night to finish out a batch of fifty portfolios. As Straub and Lunsford concede, it just wasn't possible to ask these teachers to respond in routine ways, nor within a personal pedagogical context.<sup>[1]</sup><sup>[2]</sup> In critiquing this study, Brian Huot asserts that we need to develop a dialectic between the theory and practice of responding to student writing in order to move the "focus from *how* we respond to *why* we respond" (112).

## Approaches in Literacy and Composition

A socially constructed definition of literacy moves research of student learning practices away from *how teachers can help* students to learn the literacies of the university and focuses it more on *how students and teachers understand* the literacy practices of the university (Mary Lea and Brian Street). Lea and Street argue that there are three general approaches to literacy influencing research and practice:

1. Study skills, where literacy is reduced to a set of skills that one acquires;
2. Academic socialization, where students are acculturated into the world of academic language;<sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>
3. Academic literacies, which focuses on the social practices of literacy.

In addition this last approach allies itself with critical discourse analysis, which I discuss

below, and clearly aligns itself with my central concern of using the interaction between student and writing teacher and their discourses as a place to understand “problems” in student writing. As Mary Scott suggests, students should still be introduced to the “conventions of academic writing” in an academic literacies approach but the “place and role of the conventions in the teaching and learning of academic writing are currently located in parameters which foreclose discussion and edit out individual meaning-making” (175).

These approaches to literacy have two implications for my work here: First, writing as a social practice—an academic literacies approach—informs how I talk about writing and outlines the goals and methods of my course, setting up a backdrop from which to evaluate the consistency and coherency of my responses to student writing. Second, it questions how these social practices are played out in the classroom, in student-teacher writing conferences and in teacher responses to student writing: an affirmation that all literacies, even those espousing so-called liberatory ideas and politics, are contested, intertextual, fragmented, and contradictory.[3] [4] As Monica Hermerschmidt argues, because classroom encounters are unequal and a source of inequality, researchers need to explore the interactions between “teaching practices that feel *natural* and *familiar* to teachers” and the learning practices of students that feel likewise (5; my emphasis).[4] [5]

## Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

As Thomas Huckin states, CDA’s main purpose is, through detailed analysis, to demonstrate how “public discourse” often serves the interests of the powerful. These strategies of analysis include the following:

- word/phrase level (classification, connotation, code words, metaphor, presupposition, modality);
- sentence/utterance level (transitivity, deletion, foregrounding, register, presupposition, intertextuality);
- text level (genre, heteroglossia, coherence, framing, foregrounding, omission);
- higher level concepts (naturalization, cultural models and myths, resistance, ideology).

Huckin contends that composition teachers, traditionally concerned with critical thinking, have much to gain by using the fine-grained tools of CDA to think critically about cultural texts and literacy practices. A natural use of CDA is to apply these strategies to texts read by students. I agree with this use of CDA, but here I will focus on a different kind of “public discourse”: my own public and empowered discourse as a teacher.

While not common in many composition and education studies, close analysis is clearly a distinctive feature of research in CDA. Huckin names it as one of the ten characteristics of CDA, setting CDA apart from “other forms of cultural criticism” that do not “ground their analyses in close, detailed inspection of texts.” CDA has made its way into many other fields because it offers a manner of performing close analysis of text, while still maintaining a vigilant eye on the abuse of power; a compromise between the exhaustive details and terminology of linguistic analysis (an awkward load, if you will, making linguistic analysis ineffective in disrupting the transfer of power-laden discourse as “natural”) and the overtly theoretical work in postmodernism and cultural studies.[5] [6]

## Focus on Teacher Language

Compositionists have long been concerned with the effectiveness of written feedback on

student writing.[6] [7] Many studies have indicated that we must let go of the “ideal text” (to use Brannon and Knoblauch’s phrase) in our mind as we respond to student writing. While this critique is valid, it suggests a limited number of possible readings (conservative or liberal) of a student text, which can work to essentialize the reading of a student text.[7] [8] More recently, many studies—for example Chris Anson’s “Reflective Reading: Developing Thoughtful Ways to Respond to Students’ Writing”—have begun to acknowledge teacher responses as a complex discourse that is impacted by gender, personality, context, and culture (302). Anson argues that our beliefs about pedagogy and learning are not always reflected in our comments on student papers, but that we won’t fix this problem by creating a “unified set of practices” (303); rather, he recommends we take up a more reflective practice as we respond to student writing.[8] [9] But, as Kathleen Hinchman and Rosary Lalik have pointed out, very few researches in literacy have turned their interpretive tools inward to investigate their own uses of literacy and power as teachers. Hinchman and Lalik are teacher educators who use critical autobiography to explore how their personal histories have influenced how they view literacy, and how they ultimately talk about the differing concepts of literacy to students who will become teachers. This study is a good example of how close textual analysis of our own language can produce insights into the ways we teach and talk about our subject matter and ultimately initiate social change within our local sites. Through their study they identify the “power-knowledge formations in [their] representations of literacy,” ultimately interrogating how their words construct “unequal power relations” with their interactions with students (11). Some studies in composition also make this inward turn.

One recent example is Dawn Skorzewski’s “Everybody Has Their Own Ideas: Responding to Cliché in Student Writing,” which illustrates the complex worlds that students write from, worlds full of contradictory and intense pressures that sometimes get oversimplified as merely indicators of good or bad writing.[9] [10] As Skorzewski concludes, “[o]ur challenge is to learn to recognize [. . .] the marginal comments, and the habits of thought embedded in them that have become so familiar to us that we think of them as common sense” (236).

## Contextual Description of Data

My class mirrors the trend in many introductory writing classes at colleges today—open, community-type classes where students share their writing with each other. My syllabus states, “We will become a community of thinkers, readers, writers, and learners engaged in a mutual endeavor,” a statement that reflects my beliefs that learning how to write well is difficult and necessarily a community effort. The community focus of my syllabus, *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing* text, and much of my teacher talk, work, I hope, to persuade students to own their writing.

I require three portfolios,[10] [11] which include drafts, peer reviews, and a final essay. Instead of giving letter grades to portfolios, I write responses, engaging students in conversations about their writing. My pedagogy reverberates a key concept from the course text, “to wallow in complexity,” working against writing as a reformulation of academic genres to promote the writing process as a joint, intertextual discovery of self and academia.

The two response examples I focus on come from an English 1010 class. The first example is “Karen,” a student who disliked my course, and with whom, as a writer and person, I struggled to connect. The second response example is “Jake,” a student who asked for my advice and enjoyed my class. In addition I examine, though not fully, a response[11] [12] to “Carl,” a student who improved from the first portfolio to the second, but who, in the second, uses inflammatory and deriding rhetoric to critique

environmentalists and Edward Abbey. As is common in CDA, I hope to “confirm, explain, and enrich the initial insight and to communicate that insight, in detailed fashion, to others” (Huckin), namely that my responses differ in spirit from my course goals and, in some cases, represent the institutionalized role of teacher that I continue to play, and, finally, that all of this is played out in the landscape of Lea and Street’s different approaches to literacy and the teaching of writing.

## Analysis of Example A: Communication Breakdown

Below is the response to Karen’s paper, an Informative Essay (portfolio #1) I was unsure how to deal with and from a student who did not particularly like my course. At the time of writing my response, I was aware she had concerns about my class (she didn’t like the peer review format or my grading procedures), but not that she would ultimately feel dissatisfied with my course, as she expressed in her last reflective essay. It is important to note, and it surely informs my analysis of my response to her informative essay, that Karen was unhappy with this response, as I explain in my response to her second portfolio: “Well, now I’m nervous at every word I write after reading your reflective piece. I’m sorry that my feedback has confused you—please come talk to me if you feel the same way.”

My central question or goal is to examine the details of my written communication to this student and admit my complicitness in this communication breakdown. I do not assume I had all of the power, not wanting to take away Karen’s interpretive power or agency, but understanding my language in this particular instance—responding to a confusing paper—will help me gain insight into myself as a teacher. This might not have changed Karen’s reaction. Neither does this analysis necessarily suggest how teachers *should* respond in similar circumstances. It does, though, situate my incomplete and conflicted discourse within the specific pedagogical practices of a teacher trying to communicate with a real student in an actual classroom.

Karen’s essay describes how commonly people judge others by their looks, countering this view by explaining how impossible and morally wrong it is to judge someone by their looks. I struggled in responding because I could not follow her essay, and I thought we had covered the structural issues in an earlier conference. My gut reaction was to lay out all of the problems, but then I felt that would overwhelm Karen and feed her frustrations. Whether totally conscious or not, I reframed my response in hopes of maintaining Karen’s self-esteem, softening the blow as it were, and engaging her in a dialogue about her paper. Influencing this whole encounter was my sense that she disliked my course. A few other students had concerns or questions about the peer response groups or grading, but they were willing to talk to me about their concerns. In contrast, Karen was curt and seemed annoyed when I asked about her concerns.

My response fits into the wide genre of teacher/student interactions, or teacher responses, which focus on giving feedback to students, but it is a response that struggles with this pattern. While there is certainly a wide variety of ways to respond to student texts, the general historical framing of teacher responses tends to treat literacy, in general, and student texts/writing, in particular, as autonomous “things” to manipulate, mark-up, and criticize, Lea and Street’s first category of literacy. This orientation, as noted above, tends to ignore the social and cultural aspects of writing, and ultimately, figuratively and literally, places student texts in the hands of instructors and their little red pens. In addition, the socialization model can lead to feedback that merely pushes students to approximate “text types,” such as argument, instead of accommodating and working with the details of individual meaning making (Scott 175).

Over the last few years, I have intentionally attempted to “re-frame” my responses to student writing to align them with the philosophy of the academic literacies approach. But, alas, re-framing, re-making, “re-becoming” if you will, takes time, pain, and a lot of work. Below I will illustrate how this re-framing has influenced my responses and, by contrast, how this particular response seems to be caught in the middle. Indicative of this stance, the slant of my response seems to be a type of “hedging,” a response uncomfortable with its genre obligations to give feedback. A close textual analysis illustrates this type of framing throughout my response, demonstrating that I am quite unsure, as I explicitly mention in my response, how best to interact with this text, and that this uncertainty shapes my response in particular and unexpected ways.

Karen,

(L1) You take on an issue that is personal to you and obviously is one that affects many people. (L2) I am curious why you choose to do your first paragraph as you did, reviewing the different time periods? (L3) In answering that, if you decide it is important to your paper, then I think you need to research a bit about each decade and carefully outline them. (L4) You mentioned recognized groups of the 90's but you may be more familiar with these groups because you have grown up in the 90's. (L5) I believe punks actually started in the 80's.

My initial paragraph seems to follow suit, at least on a surface level, with many of my other responses to papers, even to those papers I enjoy and feel are well crafted. In (L1) I make a very traditional move of pointing out something positive, indicating the personal and important nature of the issues her paper deals with. Although, in stark contrast to the other twelve responses I made to students in this class (nine include specific examples of what I like, two do not but are both very positive responses to papers I considered “A” papers), it is important to note that my positive introduction does not specify what exactly I like about her paper. In the next line, again following a traditional move found in many of my responses, I identify a concern and then turn it over to the student, trying to help the writer interrogate her own purposes. Looking at transitivity in (L3), I construct her as the agent, “if *you* decide it is important to *your* paper” (emphasis mine), followed by a suggestion. I raise questions about the construction of her paper, but then I let her make the choice, albeit a choice with implied restrictions. These types of textual features tend to frame my response so as to, as Kate Fisher explains, “stimulate” students to “focus on particular elements of representations while ignoring others” (20). My attempt is to frame my responses in order to allow or “stimulate” students to maintain ownership of their text—(L1) already belies this framing and (L4) and (L5) create even more discrepancy.

(L4) and (L5) begin to move away from my stated goals of the class, academic literacies framing, and represent a type of manipulation, specifically presupposition. There is a presupposed connection between the last two sentences that is not explicitly stated. First, that Karen is only familiar with the 90s, and, second, that because she is only familiar with the 90s, she didn't realize that the punk movement started before the 90s. This construction subtly assumes characteristics of Karen that I couldn't possibly know for sure. I'm focusing Karen on how I construct her understanding of this issue, rather than pushing her to reconstruct her understanding of the issue and the process she went through. By itself, this first paragraph doesn't do much to work against the Karen's autonomy, but the next paragraph creates serious contradictions between my stated goals and my earlier framing. Rereading this second paragraph causes me to pause, to cringe a bit, wondering if I am *really* the author of this response. In comparison to my other responses to students, particularly to students whose papers I enjoy, this response is constructed in a very different manner. A quick general comparison to the other twelve responses I made in this class will reveal this difference.

(L1) While I agree with your general tenet that we should try to look past how people are dressed etc and not to condemn them, I'm not convinced that we can possibly ever avoid it. (L2) Many times it seems we would put ourselves in harms way if we did not "judge" at least for certain situations. (L3) Partially I'm not convinced because I'm holding out for more specifics to show that not judging others is worthwhile. (L4) Are you sure that our outside looks do not indicate ANYTHING about who we are inside? (L5) I'm not sure this is the right feedback to give you; I'm not sure it is actually this particular issue (lack of specifics) that throws me off. (L6) I do know that I'm not taken in by certain parts of your argument. (L7) In part it may not be so much the lack of detail (you do have a couple of good examples), but the lack of specificity in discussing the connections between your different points.

Quantitatively my response to Karen has very different lexical features. For example, in six of the other twelve responses I mention specific elements of the Informative Essay structure (common view, surprising thesis, etc.). In this way I at least give the students something to work from. Also my normal use of the second person "you" and possessive "your" decreases—three and two uses respectively in my response to Karen. Randomly choosing similar quantities of text, there are five uses of "you" and five of "your" in one, seven and six in another response, and nine and one in another.<sup>[12]</sup> <sup>[13]</sup> Not to mention that my use of "you" in (L4) is placed within the context of questioning, "Are you sure," rather than indicating the action and agency of the person, as in "I'm unclear why you" or "you seem to back off that position." While this quick quantitative analysis indicates a register change, it does not necessarily indicate anything about the different ways I may be creating possibilities for confusion.

Let me move to specific examples of my responses to other students, attempting to solidify the typical framing of my responses. All of these examples are written to students in Karen's class and were written in response to the first portfolio. They make up a common type in my responses. Specifically, I want to focus on "problem-posing questions," a particular feature or technique that is common to teacher responses (Straub and Lunsford 169-70), and one that I use regularly. With this technique I try to raise questions about student writing while not taking over their writing, hoping to have them work through the issue raised. Generally, I do this by raising an issue and then asking particular questions, as will follow in the examples below. Also, I will parenthetically contextualize the responses where necessary, as these are only sections of my larger responses:

1. Knowing that good writing is hard, doesn't come easy, and may require you to start over and over, how would you characterize good writing and the process that produces it? What is at the core of this process? Why does writing feel and look like this process you describe? (This whole issue was not my issue but rather an issue this student raised in the reflective piece.)
2. Also there are times when I'm unclear on your transitions between ideas and paragraphs. How could you articulate the connections between the reasons for having a reptile pet and you actually having one? (This happens to be a fairly technical issue but other parts of my response further the partial focus on her ideas.)
3. One last thing: your conclusion. I would be interested knowing why you chose to end this way. What do you see your conclusion doing? Your new view seems to be that gov. shouldn't get so involved but in the conclusion you seem to back off that position.
4. What do you see as the connections between how society views the mentally ill and how they view themselves? Clearly there are connections but they are not articulated in your paper. This causes some confusion—what is THE overriding

point you are trying to get across?

While these examples could also be critiqued, each contains at least one question and each illustrates a transitivity that works more effectively than in my response to Karen to maintain student agency. Striking examples come from Example 1 as I reiterate a position expressed in the student's reflective piece—"writing is difficult"—and then build on the issue by asking questions. In addition, the topicalization is focused on the process of writing, a response to this student's reflective piece instead of merely discussing the paper itself. Focusing on process over product, aligns well with my stated course goals to give students opportunities to understand themselves better as writers, rather than me telling them how to do things. In Example 4, I also (as in my original) use capitalization to emphasize a point, but then follow it with a focus on what the student is trying to accomplish. Granted, questions can also be manipulative, but I would argue that these types of open-ended questions attempt to carve out or maintain student space and ownership. Overall these four examples are representative of responses that move to help maintain student ownership of their writing and ideas, while the second paragraph in Karen's response seems to detour from this type of response.

In the first three lines of the second paragraph, I express concerns about Karen's paper in a way similar to many of my responses, but when we come to (L4) my question is qualitatively different from the types of questions I usually ask. First, I do not ask a question which focuses on the student; in fact, I question Karen's imagined response before even asking the question, "Are you sure" (L4). In addition, I use capitalization, "ANYTHING," to emphasize how I want Karen to respond to this question, that I want her to re-evaluate how she views physical appearance in relation to making judgments about people. The last three lines of this paragraph are unique in comparison to my other responses and explicitly ("I'm not sure . . .") show my confusion in trying to respond to Karen's paper. While I hope my intent was to be honest about my confusion and to lessen the blow of my negative feedback, these last lines could work to subvert Karen's agency, to take over the process of figuring out her piece of writing and herself as a writer. My struggle to trust Karen is explained well in "Critical Language Awareness and Emancipatory Discourse," where Hilary Janks and Roz Ivanic discuss the need for reconstructing the subject positions of students and teachers; however, they note that "[c]ommon sense is hard to shake. It is difficult to believe that very often our students really do have a better understanding of what they need than we do" (311). This doesn't imply that students know more about writing, or that they can necessarily articulate what they know about their own writing, but that helping students become better writers entails encouraging and teaching students to access and then describe their knowledge of their own writing practices.

Concluding this point, the content or topicalization is very different from the other examples, as I already indicated with the drop in my use of the second person. In one sense the content is the imagined response to my questions. While in many of my responses I use the first person, here I do so when assuming the role of Karen. "I" becomes the topic of discussion. My response to Karen is much more personal and focused on what is going on with me, my process of struggling with her writing rather than turning the reflection of process back to her. In attempting to lessen the blow, to be less institutional and authoritarian, by creating a personal and open response, I have ironically become the subject of the response.

Contributing to how I construct Karen as a learner and writer, my use of the metaphors "throws me off" (L5) and "taken in by" (L6) create a distinct view of the learning process, a view that contradicts an academic literacies approach to learning and writing. They both work to bolster the "master myth" that learning how to write is a "form of mental transference of neatly wrapped packages [. . .] along a conveyor belt from teacher to



student” (Gee 71). Both are highly personal and subjective. The first, “throws me off,” seems indicative of something pushing one off course, something getting in the way. It insinuates a writing process of getting it right, clearing the errors away so the reader (usually the teacher) can navigate his or her way. The second, “taken in by,” reinforces the notion of an all-knowing teacher, cloaked in mystical powers, who grants the abilities to decipher text and its meanings. It is not descriptive, and even though I do hit on some details in the next line, this phrase could work to inscribe me—the teacher—with power and authority while positioning the student as the outsider, conjuring up anguished students’ pleas, “What the hell does this teacher want?”

What’s important here is not to set up some essentialist argument for the “Ten best ways” or the “Ten do-nots” of responding to student writing, but rather to identify how teachers may, at times, unwittingly change the framing of their student responses in reaction to the types of papers written, especially when the papers come out of a contested or difficult student-teacher relationship. This is not earth shattering. However, it is important for us to understand our tendencies as teachers, to better understand our use of language, in order to bolster our agency, our ability to choose the ways in which we respond to and critique student papers. CDA allows a close analysis that can bring to light the details of language that influence the genre and framing of teacher responses. This is very important. I assumed my responses to Karen’s writing differed from other responses, but I did not fully understand the register changes in my sentence structure or topicalization until closely examining my responses with the tools of CDA. It seems commonsensical that being open and personal would be a way to move towards an academic literacies approach and away from the decontextualized form and structure of the other two approaches. This analysis suggests that common sense may not help us here, and that as we try to adjust to an uncomfortable situation with a student, our responses may reinscribe the values we wish to avoid. In this case, while my response was void of much “in-your-face” institutional force, I still come up as the agent, the topic for discussion—a sly institutional force. While these problems seem obvious to me now as I look over my response anew, and probably will seem obvious, on the very first read, to those reading this essay, we all probably have “obvious” problems in the ways we respond to student writing that have become naturalized, and therefore, difficult to detect.

This analysis furthers Straub’s thesis in “The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of ‘Directive’ and ‘Facilitative’ Response” that we must take-up but also move beyond the call to “resist taking over students texts” made by Sommers and Brannon and Knoblauch in the early 1980s, by recognizing the false dichotomy in viewing teacher comments as either directive or facilitative (130). It’s not as simple as merely adopting a specific teacher response style that perfectly expresses just the right amount of control. Rather we all have to interrogate the influences on particular teacher comments arising in particular classes with particular students.

## **Analysis Example B: Asymmetricality in Unexpected Places**

Turning to my written response to a student essay on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, a closer analysis will bear out the institutional identity I take on as a teacher, even as I am theoretically trying to shed unneeded and cumbersome layers. Before analyzing this response, let me add some additional contextual information. This response was written to a student at the end of the semester as an evaluation of the last of three portfolios, the Exploratory Essay leading to a Proposal Essay portfolio, and to inform students of their final grades. As partially indicated above, my relationship with Jake was very different from my relationship with Karen. Jake would often arrive early to class, and, along with a couple of other students, we would chat about politics, sports and current events. Also, Jake would frequently have me read his current drafts, often having specific questions for

me concerning some element of his essay or writing process. Overall, my class seemed to “work” for Jake.

Jake,

(L1) What can I say? (L2) I think your last paper works very well. (L3) You have truly engaged in an exploratory process (online interview, NPR, and relevant research) and you went beyond what we hear in the news everyday to hit on some very interesting points. (L4) I could suggest additional things to make your paper even better, but writing can almost always get better. (L5) For example, you could find some of the biased cartoons about Arabs (which there have been many) and discuss and analyze them. (L6) But overall a great job. (L7) I agree with you on the grades, an A- for the course.

Using the strategies of CDA, I return to my assumption that the details of my responses do not always support my course goals and philosophy, and specifically in this case, possibly even when responding to a paper I like and gave high marks to. First, I do not see apparent avenues for analysis at the word level because there is not a lot of composition or writing jargon in this response (as found in some of my responses), though “exploratory process” (L2) is certainly a composition code word. At this point in the course, it probably doesn’t position the student because it has become part of our discourse in the classroom. More troubling, though, is my use of the words “truly engaged” (L3) as a modifier to the exploratory process. The word “truly” sets up a final evaluation of this student’s writing process, indicating that I, the omniscient teacher, can see the veracity of students’ efforts in the exploratory process, a process that, while I’ve been involved with, is far removed as students toil a way, or not, late at night in their homes and apartments. Moving to the sentence level and transitivity, the student is the subject, but I have co-opted his agency by my use of the word truly.

Later in this sentence, I indicate that the student has gone beyond what “we” hear in the news. Who is this “we”? Presumably the “we” would be people like me, so-called educated people who listen to in-depth news found on National Public Radio (NPR). As noted in John Swales and Priscilla Rogers’ analysis of corporate mission statements, citing Cheney’s study of in-house company magazines, “[t]he assumed ‘we’ is both a subtle and powerful identification strategy because it often goes unnoticed” (231). Some may suggest that this “we” may be equated with the general public or with Jake and me, but this is a problematic view. When we encourage students to go beyond what “we” hear in the news, we are not asking them to merely go beyond what students in class may have heard in the media. My proof for this is in the multitude of complaints I hear teachers level at students who do not read newspapers, who neither listen to public radio nor watch public television. For example, I always find an opportunity to mention NPR in my classes, and I’m always caught off guard that only a few students have heard of NPR; I just can’t help wish that they were in on the knowledge I am privy to. While I don’t feel guilty about wanting students to have more knowledge, this subtle act of identification, established by invoking “we,” creates a sense that all writing teachers would read the paper in the way I did, that somehow I know what educators hear in the news. Again, I have positioned myself as the sole audience of this piece of writing, even though I have students read each other’s work and tell them they are writing to the class. Returning to my definition of literacy, this construction could espouse the academic socialization view, the idea that all academic discourse is homogenous, and, as an “expert,” I am able to delineate its boundaries.

In the next sentence (L4) the transitivity switches, and I become the agent, an agent to “suggest” and make better. Interestingly, I use the conditional “could” indicating that I could but will not give additional suggestions, but again, in contradiction, I go ahead in

(L5) and give suggestions. My first statement illustrates a need to say something negative about student papers. In and of itself this is not so bad; still it highlights a common conflict in teacher discourse. In this discourse I feel I *must* critique and suggest even if I do not feel strongly about those comments. So, while this example is possibly quite benign, it hints at a larger institutional force that says good teachers critique and find fault. Why critique Jake if I find his work good “overall”? Moving into these kinds of critiques makes it more likely that I will begin to take over the students writing rather than encourage them to re-envision what they are doing. In this example, my critique seems to really be saying, “Great paper, but if I were writing it I would put in an example of a cartoon about Arabs.”

Coming back to (L5), it is interesting that I parenthetically inform Jake of the abundance of negative stereotyped cartoons of Arabs. Again, my writing resumes the defensive stance of much teacher evaluation, justifying grades and, in this example, criticism. In essence, I’m justifying my suggestion by informing Jake that he “should” have found at least some of these types of political cartoons or at least referenced their existence. I am also setting in action the “we” discussed earlier, a set of people like me who have knowledge of these types of political cartoons. It is not that my point may not be valid or that my intentions were unethical, but what is to be gained by indicating that there are many examples? If I want him to get a sense of what I’m getting at, I should merely reference an example. And if I don’t have enough time to do that, I should probably keep my keen insights into how many examples of Arab cartoons are out there to myself, unless I’m set on invoking the socialization view by sharing key information about what *all* academics surely know and would incorporate into a similar argument.

Returning to the word level, “overall” in (L6) is a type of word often used by teachers and definitely used in my evaluation of writing. In many ways, by using this word, I want to criticize details of student papers, while not making them feel as if all has gone wrong or that they did not succeed. It is possibly a way of, again, defending my suggestions by lessening their impact. Also, using the word “overall” indicates my need to give the paper my general stamp of approval. While this might be a quick way to let a student know how I feel about their paper and progress, relying on trite general statements can reinforce this god-like notion of writing teachers decoding, at a glance, “good” and “bad” essays. This notion could work to focus attention on acceptance into the academic community, rather than engaging the student in a process of evaluating what works and why. While unsure if my use of “overall” is important to my analysis, it does seem important to interrogate widely accepted ways of responding to student writing. My aim is not to eradicate such “sinful” practices, but rather put on the table, emptying my pedagogical pockets, my uncomfortableness with this phrase and possible reasons for this discomfort.

I intentionally skipped over (L1), leaving it for the end, a beginning point for my conclusion of this analysis. The locution of my first phrase is merely a question. But there is a contradiction between the literal meaning of my question, and what I say after, or, in affect, the illocutionary force of the statement, where I do indeed have something to say. Because institutional goals and procedures indicate I should say something, I do, or, possibly, I really always wanted to say something but hoped to soften or appeal to my course goals by starting with the indirect question that indicates approval. The analysis of (L1)—namely its contradictory nature—sets up my text-level analysis. To understand the importance of the granular analysis of this text, it is important to recognize the genre expectations and pressures of a teacher response to student writing. These contradictions in my response come out of the contradictory “intertextual linkages” (Huckin) that exert force on this institutionalized text. For example, while some teachers like me may wish to create community type writing environments (arguably an academic literacies approach), it is impossible to escape our power as instructors.

My analysis of this response suggests the need to also question how we respond to papers we like, papers that receive the coveted "A" mark. That in these responses teachers, as I have done here, may still find reverberations of old ideological models, long forgotten as course goals yet ever present as syntactical and lexical features of one's responses. These are important issues if our goal is to help students attain a sense of their own identity as social agents responsible for their views on issues and their construction of these views in writing.

## Discussion, Conclusions, and Added Complexity

Situating the analysis of my responses within, what Huckin terms, "higher-level concepts" of CDA, I want to draw from another exchange with a student, an exchange that is not easily defined, other than by my emotional involvement. I will not do a full textual analysis of this last response, as it is lengthy and complicated. Still, I refer to it here to highlight what Skorzewski explains is the best way to understand our "habits of thought": "We need look no further than the places that most offend, frustrate, or annoy us in student writing to find clues for how to read our own ideology as it presents itself in response to our students' work" (236).

Huckin argues that when people take on a certain reading position time and time again, they are prone to view these positions and the ideas expressed within the context of these positions as natural, normal, and rational. And continually taking up certain reading positions *may* lead to a dominant discourse which protects itself, to a degree, against resistance, working to preserve its hegemonic power structures. In several instances, the discourse of my written responses could work to position students to see my responses as part of a skill-based approach in which I am telling them what to do in order to "fix" their writing or as part of a socialization model where I also tell them what to do, but within the complex context of the set forms of academia. While I have not taken up an analysis of how students interpret my responses, it is clear to me that there is at least a danger that some students will indeed appropriate these contradictions in my discourse and be confused at best or subordinated at worst. As noted earlier, these three approaches are not always at odds with one another, but teachers still must work to be more conscious of when they rely on the first two approaches and then decide to discard these practices, or help students see how they fit or tie into an academic literacies approach.

In addition, a certain vulnerability exists because students in many cases have been taught to view writing as a skill-based process; this is the way it is discussed in schools, in the media, and within politics (e.g., "Writing is an important job skill," or "English teachers know all that grammar and spelling stuff"), and/or a socialization-based process (e.g., "This is just the way it's done in academic writing"). It is disturbing to me that as a teacher committed to an academic literacies approach, I am still *unknowingly* not only invoking an academic socialization but also a skills and error paradigm. Hopefully, using CDA to examine our language in formal or informal ways will help to curb these inconsistencies or at least give credence to their existence as many students will attest to, albeit in different language: "Damn, one minute she tells us to think for ourselves and the next she wants us to do it her way." At times, as with my response to Karen and Jake, changing our language and positioning will seem natural as soon as we recognize the contradictions between our responses and our pedagogical goals. In other situations this may be much more difficult yet possibly even more important.

Let me turn to such an example, a student I will call Carl. Carl wrote a response to Edward Abbey's, "The Damnation of a Canyon." Being a sportsman and frequent visitor of Lake Powell, Carl was less than enthusiastic about Abbey's assertions that we should

drain Lake Powell and return Glenn Canyon to its former beauty. While Carl's paper is technically sound and brings out some powerful critiques of Abbey—the incompatibility of science and politics, for example—he also uses personal attack to get across his point: “Abbey must have too much time on his hands to worry about something so stupid as a ‘pretty’ canyon.” Here is part of my response dealing with Carl's Ad Hominem approach:

Ultimately, you would have to decide, and you already did in this case, who your audience was and what you wanted to accomplish. I think your paper could work effectively to rile up people against liberals and environmentalists, but, although you have many strong arguments, your paper, to me, doesn't work to engage people of differing views in meaningful conversations.

Carl responded back to me, concerning this issue, in the following way:

I say Abbey doesn't look at real issues because I feel there are other things so much more important than draining a lake simply because the canyon was beautiful (and that is his argument). Issues such as kids killing each other at school, or even education. Maybe that was a mistake I made because maybe Abbey doesn't think those are so important.

He ends his response to me saying, “Thanks for the Response and I hope nothing was taken personal *by you*” (my emphasis). Carl is referring here to my response and to our class discussion. During one class period I asked Carl and two other students to read their papers about Abbey's essay. The other two students also disagreed with Abbey but did not resort to personal attack. During the discussion I, along with a couple of other students, expressed concern that as environmentalists or conservationists, we were offended by his belittling of Abbey and that rhetorically his sarcasm worked against our engagement with his ideas. I sense that his response back to me is still belittling Abbey and environmentalists and, particularly in the last line, me. I am very tempted to “socialize” the hell out of Carl by saying, “Look bud, this won't make it; this is college so get off your high horse and start thinking more critically because you can't get away with that here . . .” This temptation is heightened when we confront students who belittle the ideas we find sacred, ideas we see as important for maintaining democracy and our vision of freedom.

While I could go into a lengthy analysis of this encounter, my purpose here is to use this example to ratchet up the emotional investment that can occur when responding to student writing, illustrating how difficult it may be to change the ways we respond to student writing. My encounter with Carl represents a situation where it would be easy to abuse my power over students in ways that I/we wouldn't even need CDA to detect. This example, then, demonstrates that if we are honest with ourselves most of us do indeed encounter situations where we do, or are at least extremely tempted to, abuse our power. If we allow ourselves to cut off student agency because of our obligation to protect the sanctity of core beliefs, we have only reproduced the powerful forces of discourse that *may* lead to subordination and manipulation. Doing so ignores the difficult worlds students are encountering as they try to negotiate the complex collision of their world with the world of academia. For example, Carl may be responding to what he perceives in Abbey's essay as an attack on his values—Abbey is also sarcastic and cutting concerning those who enjoy Lake Powell (e.g., “This argument appeals to the wheel chair ethos of the wealthy, upper-middle-class American slob”). It would be interesting to explore the ways in which I accept certain kinds of “academic” discourse from famous and/or experienced essayists, but am unwilling to accept these same conventions in student writing. Sarah Freedman, in “The Registers of Student and Professional Expository Writing: Influences on Teachers' Responses,” demonstrates how teachers are

critical of professional essays they assume were written by students. I could have admitted this to Carl: "I can see that you are employing some of the same rhetorical strategies as Abbey. Some teachers may find these offensive and/or may argue that they will not engage people with different views. What do you think? Is this risk worth it and/or do you have other motives for employing these strategies? Why might a teacher 'accept' these types of strategies from Abbey but not from a student writer?"

We can still expose inequality, but ultimately, if we want to engage students in an academic literacies model, we must view the act of reading student writing as "an attempt to identify what each student is doing, and where it might come from, and [it] should not represent an *exclusive* concern with what the student has not done or with how the essay does or does not conform to the paradigms of argument favoured in the particular discipline or field" (Scott 181; my emphasis). This attempt recognizes students as active agents in producing text and exerting subjectivities, even subjectivities that may seem to, and may well, ridicule others, ourselves, and thoughtful ideas. And this also may suggest that we continue to use techniques from the skills or socialization approach because they help particular students at particular times, or because students ask us to use techniques that they feel more comfortable with and perceive as necessary for their development as writers. Ultimately, an academic literacies approach pushes teachers to follow the spirit of the approach and pedagogy rather than the letter; it's not just the details of each sentence in our responses to students, but, more importantly, how we frame those sentences. As with the example above, I'm still going to tell Carl that his paper may not work to fully engage those who disagree with him, but I will frame my comments in the larger context, admitting that the issue is not clear-cut.

Some may suggest that the findings here are unremarkable, that there are many lists of ways to respond to writing that, if followed, would take care of these problems. What's the big deal? Others, possibly more probable, may suggest that my responses are obviously flawed, and that they don't need CDA to tell them that. But, in admitting our conflicted and contested discourse as teachers, we are admitting that merely following a list of suggestions will not get us there, and we are exposing ourselves to criticism. What I've done here is try to illustrate the validity of not only keeping a sort of writing teacher's journal, but to do so with a close textual analysis of our comments to students in specific contextualized teaching moments.

Also I'm suggesting that our language doesn't always serve its intended purposes, even though many of us have a solid understanding of discourse and how it works. We are more like our students than we may want to admit, as we attempt to learn about our teacher discourse with particular students in demanding, troubling, and complicated situations. As Luke notes, "[e]very text is a kind of institutional speech act, a social action with language with a particular shape and features, force, audience, and consequences" (15). Because I believe in a literacy model, like Lea and Street's academic literacies approach, which incorporates the ambiguities of student texts and student/teacher conflicts and disagreements about these texts, I want the best consequences possible for my speech acts as I respond to student writing: I want *my* writing to create the possibility for authentic student writing and ideas, inviting students to construct themselves and their texts in contradictory and contested fashions. And, as my last example illustrates, this may require me to humble myself in the face of what I perceive as irritating and/or incomprehensible "logic." Viewing our responses in these ways has broad implications for introductory writing teachers and students, research on teacher responses, and finally composition studies.

As Slevin indicates in "Disciplining Students: Whom Should Composition Teach and What Should They Know?" a key element of composition as a field is

the encounter of ordinary people with different ways of reading and writing; our discipline exists in acts of instruction and discussion, not as a bounded field of knowledge expanded by research. When we discuss expanding the canon, we [. . .] discuss [. . .] *encounters* with new student populations and new ways of reading and thinking and persuading *brought* into our classrooms by our students. (159; my emphasis)

Composition theory is unique in that it attempts to take student voices and identities seriously, to incorporate them into the very fabric of the class, the research, the conversations. In order to accomplish this, we must continually ask difficult questions about ourselves, our pedagogy, and our responses to student writing, even if these questions may lead to implicating ourselves as the "villains."

—Ron Christiansen

## Notes

[1] [14] Certainly we can still learn from the "crafted" models in *Twelve Readers Reading*, but these decontextualized responses can only teach us so much about the types of responses we write and why we write them. As Brian Huot notes in *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, there is little to disagree with in Straub's seven principles for responding to student writing (found in a later piece, "The Student, the Test and the Classroom Context" where Straub builds on his earlier work), but the "focus is once again only on practice, with little attempt to see response within a theoretical, pedagogical, or communicative context" (111). The analysis of my responses below, couched within a specific pedagogical and theoretical context, attempts to make this move.

[2] [15] While this approach broadens the scope by focusing on genres and types of specific learned discourse, it can assume a "homogeneous" academic community, cementing academic genres as "true" types, failing to investigate literacy as a socially constructed and institutional process (Lea and Street). It also tends to reward students for "reformulating" texts rather than "challenging" them, the latter being rejected and rationalized away because often this stance can create confused, seeming disorganized prose (Lea).

[3] [16] The central contradictions in my responses seem to occur somewhere among academic literacies, a focus of my graduate work and an approach that I am theoretically and professionally committed to, the skills model, which dominated my writing instruction in high school and college, and the socialization model, which made up much of my undergraduate college training as a writing instructor. My analysis of my responses will attempt to illustrate the tensions among these approaches in my practice. Though the academic literacies approach will inform my analysis, I am not asserting that these approaches to literacy are "mutually exclusive;" rather only that the academic-literacies approach encompasses and builds on the first two (Lea and Street).

[4] [17] A careful analysis of our own language and discursive practices as writing instructors can allow us to explore our "abilities" to impact student subjectivities. Figuring out these institutional identities requires writing teachers to jump in amongst the clichés, contradictions, intertextuality, and incoherence, in order to identify, for example, ideologies from the past that can unintentionally shape and manipulate teacher discourse. Obviously, teachers can never, in the current educational structure, remove themselves completely from their authority, nor would we necessarily want to, but shedding away the layers of authority that are really fictions is a useful endeavor. We do

give grades; we do have power; but we do not have a “fix” on how writing works in all rhetorical contexts or for all writers. Unfortunately, we can’t wait for an outside researcher to offer their services; for most of us, we are the only ones who have the ability and interest in doing a careful textual reading of the texts we produce in our roles as teachers

[5] [18] Discussing CDA in the context of educational research, Allan Luke asks, “What is to count as discourse analysis in educational research?” Luke notes that many studies in the early 90’s attempted to critique institutional power through interrogations of pedagogy, but few of these Foucauldian studies use a detailed analysis of the linguistic features of the text (10). This same critique is leveled by Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, identifying Foucault’s analysis as “abstract” (261). So while Luke encourages the Foucault influenced studies, he notes that many educational studies “have difficulty showing how large-scale social discourses are systematically [. . .] manifest in everyday talk and writing in local sites” (11).

[6] [19] Early studies such as Nancy Sommers’s “Responding to Student Writing” brought to the foreground the paradox that “although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood” (148). George Hillocks’s meta-analysis of research—a few years after Sommers’s study—on the process of writing, continued to flesh out this paradox by demonstrating that most teachers’ comments do not impact the quality of student writing.

[7] [20] The implication is that if we disregard the ideal text in our minds, that if we do not “preempt the writer’s control by ignoring intended meanings in favor of formal and technical flaws” then we will motivate writers to express their meaning (221). Again this is good advice, but it oversimplifies the difficulty of creating responses to student writing that do no “preempt” student control. As will be seen the linguistic detail of my responses, my responses work against student agency even as I’m trying to move away from the notion of an idealized student text.

[8] [21] Anson suggests many different avenues for greater reflection: workshops, teacher portfolios, collaborative teaching, classroom-based research and others. Under the section on classroom-based research, Anson lists several questions appropriate for our research designs. Many of these questions (how do we respond? How does it change according to the conditions, different writers? etc.) are the types of questions I will attempt to get at through an analysis of my responses. Part of creating a reflective practice demands that we scrutinize the details of our own language in everyday teacher practices.

[9] [22] Furthering this point, Skorczewski discusses how one of her students locates himself within his own discourse, reminding us that students are not merely “negotiating a space for [themselves] in academic discourse” but are also people with a “history” who are “active social agent[s] in a field of competing claims [. . .] as an individual and a member of a culture” (229). This seems so difficult to remember as writing instructors. It may be because of our good intentions to manage and control our interactions with students and their texts, hoping to maintain our clarity of purpose and ideal of student mastery. In hopes to overcome these tendencies, Skorczewski analyzes her responses to student writing, bemoaning the lack of articles that refer specifically to student texts and teachers’ particular reactions and comments on and to these texts, the “contact zone” (231). Many studies analyze the discourse of other teachers, but the move to analyze our own language is a move to do what we ask students to do as they master academic discourse.

[10] [23] Each portfolio focuses on one particular writing assignment: (1) Informative Essay—describe the common view of an issue and then counter this view with a



surprising thesis; (2) Strong Response Essay—read with and against the grain of an essay from the textbook; and (3) Exploratory and Proposing a Solution Essay—explore an issue and propose a solution. Students must also include a reflective piece with each portfolio that analyzes their writing and the choices they have made throughout the portfolio.

[11] [24] This encounter actually occurred the semester after my encounters with Karen and Jake in a university night course I taught as an adjunct.

[12] [25] To get a sense of how “you,” considering frequency and usage, flavors my other responses here is the first three lines of the response with nine uses of “you”: “At first I thought your essay was going in a different direction and, at times, in a variety of directions. After reading the whole thing I then understood why you started the way you did and why you used the examples. I don’t know if that is the effect you wanted on the reader???”

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